

# NOTES YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



## Improving Employability for At-Risk Youth:

### *The Dominican Republic's Youth Development Project*

Poverty traps youth with insufficient education, life skills or job skills, making the transition from school dropout to the workplace difficult, and perpetuating the cycle as their children are then raised in poverty. **Providing life skills, technical skills, an internship, and a second chance at formal education can enhance the employability of poor youth.** This issue of YDN presents the Dominican Republic's Youth Development Project, a \$30 million investment to improve the job—and life—prospects of young Dominicans.



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*Today's youth (15–24) constitute the largest cohort ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Nearly 90% live in developing countries and the challenges they face—low quality education, lack of marketable skills, high rates of unemployment, crime, early pregnancy, social exclusion, and the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS infections—are costly to themselves and to society at large. Client demand for policy advice on how to tap the enormous potential of youth is large and growing. This series aims to share research findings and lessons from the field to address these important cross-sectoral topics.*

## Country Context: The Dominican Republic (DR)

In the late 1990s, the Dominican Republic (DR) boasted one of the fastest growing economies in Latin America, until 2003, when the country suffered a banking crisis and subsequent economic stagnation. For Dominican youth, this resulted in an increase in the unemployment rate from 23% in 2001 to more than 30% by the end of 2003. Coupled with one of the region's poorest performing education systems, increasing numbers of poor youth found themselves out of school and jobless. During the consultations for the 2005 Country Assistance Strategy (CAS),<sup>1</sup> the concern regarding the lack of job opportunities for young people was mentioned unanimously by community representatives, neighborhood associations, employers associations, government agencies and youth alike. The DR Poverty Assessment<sup>2</sup> and CAS suggested that this likely had a bearing on the notable increase in crime and violence over the same period, as young Dominicans struggled to find their way into the country's economic and social development.

In response to this challenge, the Government sought the support of the World Bank to expand opportunities for poor youth to increase their employability through second chance programs in job skills and education. Two key programs are targeted for expansion and strengthening under the new Youth Development Project.<sup>3</sup> The first is a pilot **Youth and Employment program (Juventud y Empleo — JyE)** originally financed by the Inter American Development Bank (2001)<sup>4</sup> and based on the *Chile Joven* model.<sup>5</sup> This program, managed by the Ministry of Labor, provides disadvantaged youth with training and internships as an avenue towards gaining a first work experience. The second supports the Ministry of Education's **Second Chance Education programs** designed to provide overage school dropouts a chance to complete their formal education at night and on weekends.

In addition to expanding these two existing programs, the Youth Development Project also creates links between them. This is done conceptually, through supporting the Ministries of Labor and Education under one World Bank Loan, and operationally, through joint program promotion, scholarships for JyE graduates to attend the second chance education programs, and joint project evaluations.

## A Demand-Driven Training Model

Operating through the Ministry of Labor, Juventud y Empleo (JyE) equips disadvantaged youth with both the technical skills needed to carry out an occupation, and the life skills needed to thrive in the workplace, and life more generally. A key element of the program is that the training is demand-

driven. It is directly linked to an internship with a private employer previously identified by the training institution. Based on the preliminary results of the JyE impact evaluation, the Bank was asked to co-finance this program, and strengthen it through: i) improving the link between training institution and employer; ii) enhancing and refining life skills modules during the training; iii) linking the training program to 'second chance' education programs that would both enhance and complement the technical and on-the-job training; and iv) expanding the impact evaluation to measure impact on reducing youth risk behaviors. Through Bank funds, the JyE will be able to finance training/internships for approximately 10,000 youth per year ages 16–29. This section delineates some of the key elements of the program.

**Targeted to the Disadvantaged:** The aim of JyE is to provide opportunities for young people from poor families that otherwise have very limited access to training programs and work opportunities. As such, the criteria for participation are that youth be out of school and jobless, having never completed secondary school. The program is using the government's Poverty Map as an initial regional targeting mechanism, while awaiting finalization of the country's Unified Beneficiary Targeting System which is proxy means tested. Participants are offered a stipend of approximately US\$2 per day to help cover the costs of food and transportation.

**Technical Training:** During the first phase of the program, participants receive between 8–12 weeks of technical training, offered by independent training institutes (called "ICAPs"), which are pre-certified by the National Institute for Professional and Technical Training (INFOTEP) as having the

### Box 1: Preliminary Impact Evaluation: Some Findings

The first impact evaluation of the Youth Development Program in the DR (randomized with control groups) demonstrated the following positive impacts:

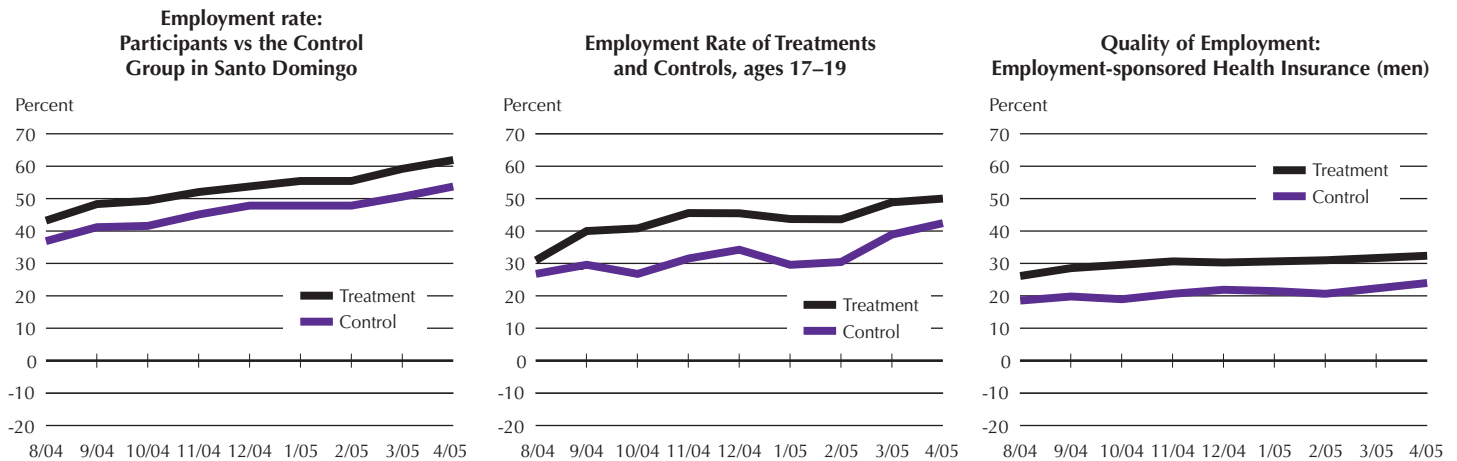
- 10% higher wages for participants
- Higher quality of employment as measured by employer-sponsored health insurance
- Greater impact in urban areas, especially Santo Domingo
- Male teens (17–19) benefit most from the program

The evaluation also found that, particularly for the older cohort (25+) and in rural areas, the program was less effective in placing participants in jobs. These findings have led to important changes in the design of the next phase of the program, with increased emphasis on strengthening the links with the private sector, finding alternative types of training for rural areas (including a pilot self-employment component), and an increased emphasis on life skills.

Source: Card, D., Ibararan, P., Regalia, F., Rosas, D., Soares, Y. 2006. "Labor Market Impacts of Youth Training in the Dominican Republic: Evidence from a Randomized Trial". Inter-American Development Bank: Washington DC. May.



Figure 1. Findings from the JyE Impact Evaluation



necessary infrastructure and technical staff and experience to carry out the training. The courses are designed by the ICAPs, based on the previously identified demand for internships (and where vacancies exist), usually with private firms.

**A First Work Experience:** In order to ensure the demand-driven nature of the training, the ICAPs are required to first identify internships with local employers. They subsequently design/adjust the content of the technical training based on the specific needs of the employer. As such, the willingness to take on interns (and in some cases vacancies) serves as a proxy for employer demand in that field. The internships last for about 8–12 weeks, during which staff from ICAPs accompany participants.

**Skills for Succeeding in Life—and the Workplace:** The program integrates life skills education to help young people be more effective employees and citizens. Among the topics taught are self-esteem, teamwork, communication skills, work organization and service skills, job search skills, and knowledge related to risky behaviors (reproductive health, drug use, violence, etc.). Similar life skills modules are also integrated into the second chance education program (see next section).

**Partnering for Sustainability:** The project partners closely with INFOTEP to assist with program management and for co-financing. INFOTEP is responsible for certifying training institutes, technically evaluating training proposals, and supervising the delivery of the technical training components. The Institute is financed by a fixed payroll tax and thus has a relatively independent source of financing for offering training courses which are mostly targeted to the employed. In order to learn from the JyE experience, INFOTEP has agreed to co-finance 400 training courses for youth at risk, particularly in rural areas with innovative approaches (mobile training units). It is envisioned that INFOTEP be the long term institutional home for the JyE.

**Building Capacity to Address At-Risk Youth:** An important component to the program is the capacity-building for the Ministry of Labor and INFOTEP to better address the needs of at-risk youth. Among the institutional functions being strengthened is the ability to train local training institutes in key elements of the program such as life skills, and linking the program to the national unified targeting system.

**Measuring Results on Youth Development:** The program has one of the most carefully designed impact evaluations of any youth program in the region. It has a randomized trial design allowing the Ministry of Labor to measure the impact of program participation as compared to a control group across a number of indicators focused initially on measuring the program's short term impact on employment. Under the new phase of the program, the evaluation was expanded to measure impact on indicators such as improving self-esteem, returning to formal education, and reducing risky behaviors of participants, including risky sexual behavior, tobacco and alcohol use, participation in gangs and other forms of violence over both the immediate and medium-term time frames.

## Second Chance Education

Only 53% of Dominican youth ever complete primary school.<sup>6</sup> What is more, the net enrolment rate at the secondary level is a paltry 35%. The main reasons cited for school leaving in the DR are the need to earn money, early marriage or pregnancy, and a perceived irrelevance of the education. In response, the Ministry of Education is investing in overall improvements to the education system. However, it also recognizes the importance of addressing the needs of the large cohort of youth already outside of the formal school system by offering early school leavers the opportunity to complete their education through a series of flexible second chance education programs offered in the evenings and on weekends.



- EBA (Educación Basica de Jovenes y Adultos) enables overage youth and adults (for ages 15 and above) to complete their basic education (8th grade equivalent). PREPARA enables youth and adults (for ages 19 and above) to complete their secondary education (high school diploma equivalent) either in four years or in an accelerated 2-year program for qualified entrants.

Some of the key elements of these programs are:

**Flexible Schedule:** There are very real pressures on poor Dominican youth to contribute to the household income and to take care of their children during regular hours of business or school. For this reason EBA and PREPARA classes are held at nights and on weekends.

**Accelerated Programs:** Students have the option to attend classes either twice weekly (for three hours), or once on weekends (for six). For those highly motivated students that scored well on the 8th grade primary leaving exam (minimum 80%), PREPARA offers a fast-track that covers two weeks of the regular course in one. This allows these students to complete four years of secondary schooling in just two years.

**Minimal Fees to Cover the Costs of Textbooks:** In order to ensure commitment and help co-finance the second chance education, the program charges a minimal fee (approximately US\$30/year) for its textbooks when students enroll.

**Targeting the Beneficiaries:** In order to avoid attracting students currently enrolled in the formal daytime education system, the EBA and PREPARA programs have strict minimum age requirements: 15 for not having completed 8th grade and 19 for not having completed secondary school.

**Incorporating Life Skills:** The programs will also be integrating life skills education similar in content to the *JyE*. The main difference is in the methodology of the delivery, as the beneficiaries in the second chance education programs span a large age range, the programs are longer in nature (1–4 years). Consequently life skills training can be incorporated more gradually and holistically across a longer period of time.

## A Cross-Sectoral Approach to Easing the School-to-Work Transition

In sum, the Youth Development Project offers poor youth an opportunity to make the transition from school (or school dropout) to work, gaining invaluable life skills along the way. It achieves this by working across sectors and ministries—of education, labor, youth and planning, among others—and by strengthening the capacity of government and private training institutions to identify and better respond to the unique challenges that youth at risk face.

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